

Ecology and the Cultural &
Economic Importance of
Black ash (*Fraxinus nigra* Marsh)

for Native Americans

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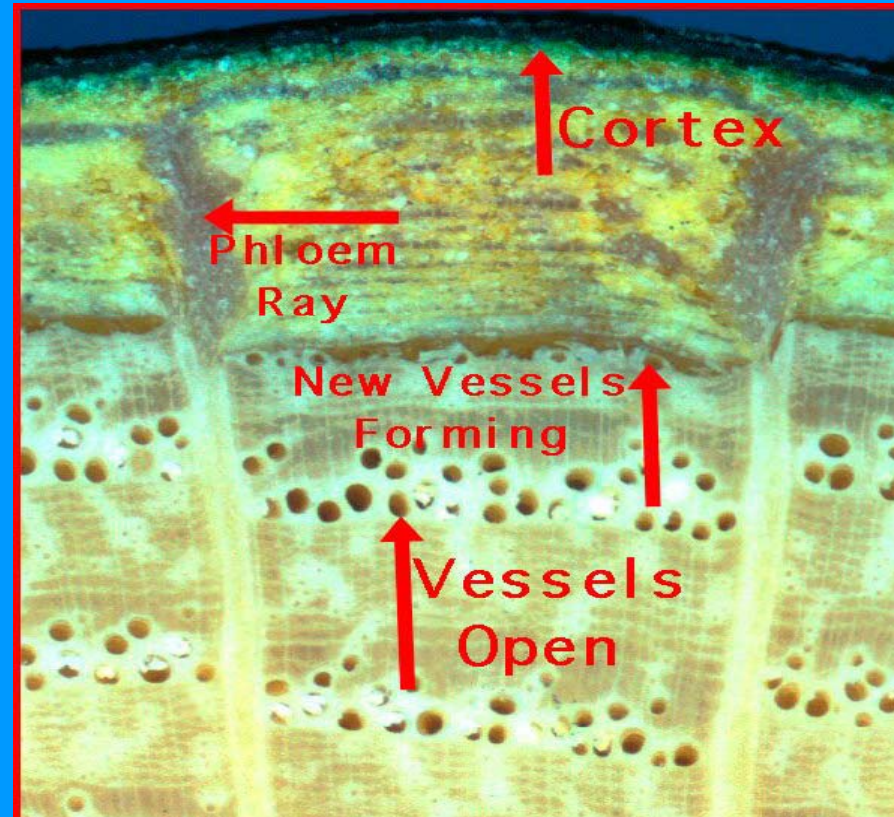
Ecology

- Black Ash (Brown Ash)
 - Commonly found in wetland areas
 - Often found along streams
 - Upland Component
 - Vernal Ponds (Seasonally Wet in Spring)
- Usually on of the Last Trees to Leaf out and First to loose leaves
 - May be the Reason for its unique characteristics sought by basket makers

Characteristics of Wood

- Ring Porous Tree
 - Springwood (early wood) forms the vascular system (plumbing).
 - Very large In comparison to other ring porous trees
 - Because of this the ring separate very easily (Prone to Ring Shake)
 - Summer wood (late wood)
 - Much Denser than Springwood

Characteristics of Wood



Source:

<http://treedictionary.com/DICT2003/HTMLFILES/woodtypes.html>

Basket Makers Hunt for the Ideal Basket Tree

- Look for an open grown tree
 - Good crown form and size
 - Usually Found on hummocks in wetlands
 - Ring width or thickness should be:
 - Minimum the thickness of a nickel
 - Ideally 10-20 years of good growth (from outside to inside)
 - Straight Almost Defect Free Bole
 - Minimum 6" diameter small end
- Try not to harvest in too close proximity to cedar



Cross Section of Basket Log



Pre European Contact History

- Black ash has been used for thousands of years
 - Utility Baskets: Pack, food preparation, storage of household items
 - Ceremonial uses
 - Fish traps and weirs
 - Gifts
 - Trade

“Native Basket makers believe that splint basketry has always been part of our traditions. We believe basket making is a skill that has been passed from weaver to weaver...uninterrupted for thousands of years...from the east coast of Canada, south to the mid-Atlantic of the United States, and west to the Great Lakes area” (Jennifer Sapiel Neptune – Unpublished Paper 2006).





Photo A - Workers are carrying ash log out of forest.



Photo B - Pounding ash log - Notice how the splints separate into layers.



Photo C - Foreground tool is a gauge, which is used to cut splints into predetermined widths.



Photo D - "A" frame is used as a guide to split the splints down to the thickness of paper.



Photo E - Molds are used to start baskets - Notice how the splints are bent into a 90° angle at bottom.



Photo F - Weaver is finishing a corn-washing basket by binding the top rims with 1/8" wide splints.



Photo G - Finished fancy baskets - Dark bands are sweetgrass woven into a basket.



Photo H - Finished pack baskets and coils of splints.

Pre European Contact History

- Black ash is part of Oral Creation & History
 - Wabanaki Confederation: Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and Micmac Tribes of Maine
 - Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy): Mohawk, Oneida,
 - Lake State Ojibwa, Ho-Chunk, Potawatomi,
 - The Wabanaki and Ojibwa Have Stories that refer to Black ash and baskets.

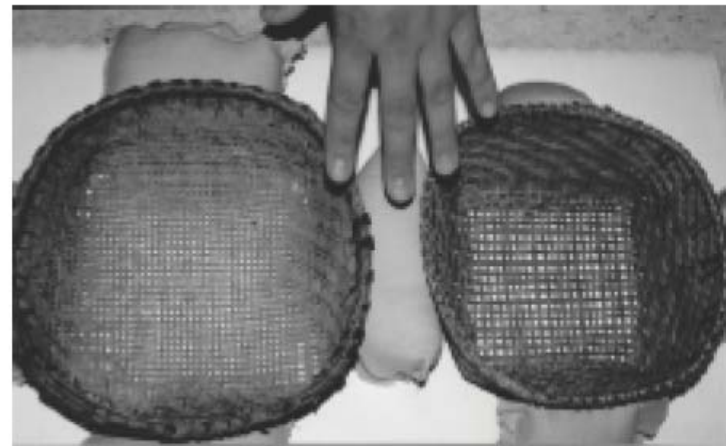


Photo Courtesy of Jennifer Sapiel Neptune, Penobscot Nation

Post European Contact History

- Reduction in Land Base Created a need for a new economy
 - Supplied Europeans with baskets for agriculture, fishing, household needs
 - “Fancy” Baskets came into demand and are based on ceremonial and household baskets.
 - Important source of cash or credit until shortly after WWII
 - Utility Baskets were the first to lose out to plastics and imports
 - Fancy Baskets flourished until the 1970’s when many of the women who would have become basket makers entered the workforce.



Post European Contact - Present History

- Much of the Culture and Languages were disappearing due to Official United States Policies that were put in place during the 1800's
 - Extermination 1830's -1890's
 - Extermination through Assimilation 1900-1950's
 - Termination 1950's
- Cultural Awakening and Renaissance
 - 1960's Present.
 - Language Immersion in grade schools
 - A return to Cultural roots and traditions
 - Black ash basket making reached its lowest number of weavers in 1970's
 - 1980's – present, weavers increased as well as other cultural skills and arts.



Conclusion

- Black ash basket making is just one small part of our traditions.
- The loss of this important resource will have a tremendous impact on Tribes who use it.
- “Indian crafts” are often an important source of income. They often utilize non-commercial species that receive very little research or management.
- It is a direct connection with our past.
- *“The Ash tree is considered sacred by many tribes that make baskets from its splints” (Jennifer Sapiel Neptune Unpublished Paper 2006).*



Conclusion

- It is important to consider all species in natural resource management. Always consider the needs of tribes.
- All Federal Agencies are obligated to help manage Tribal Natural Resources in a sustainable manner and that must include cultural resources as well, not just “commercial” species
- Past Generations relied on basket making to feed their families and is still the case in many communities. So in this context we consider ash a commercial as well as a cultural species



A lot of our traditions have slipped away or have totally been lost. But I really believe that it's all still out there for us - if we just ask respectfully and then know how to listen (Jennifer Sapiel Neptune)

